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Residents donating to tsunami victims warned of scams

By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter

The Brandywine Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP), the Attorney General's Office and Delaware Department of Technology are encouraging residents to use caution when donating money to tsunami relief efforts to avoid fraud and scams, and to ensure that donations make it to their intended targets.

Judy Diogo, President of the AFP's Brandywine Chapter says Americans are characteristically generous and respond positively to world crises, but they should be vigilant and informed in their giving.

Most people will not encounter a fraudulent

solicitor or organization, because 99 percent of tsunami relief efforts, even those you haven't heard of, are legitimate, she says.

"But we feel it's important to remind the public that it pays to be careful," she says. "Give freely, but give wisely. As we saw with the 9/11 relief efforts, there are always a few unscrupulous scam artists who would seek to take advantage of American generosity and make a quick buck at the expense of others," she says.

To make sure that funds are put to their intended use, Diogo suggests donors find out two things before making a donation: is the organization legitimate, and if so, will the money be used in a way consistent with the giver's intent.

Regarding use of funds in legitimate organizations, remember that some organizations concentrate on specific relief efforts or countries, she says, and other organizations may have already received enough funding for their projects and may use your donation for some other purpose. There's nothing wrong with that, so long as the charity informs the donor up front, she says, but be sure to ask.

Regarding making sure that an organization is legitimate, she says, some charities are household names. But the Internet has allowed smaller groups to organize local efforts that

January donations deductible for 2004

In order to encourage helping tsunami-stricken south Asia, many January 2005 donations for disaster relief efforts will be deductible on 2004 tax returns.

The law enacted on January 7 applies to those who itemize on their tax returns.

To qualify for the extended 2004 deduction, contributions must be made to domestic, tax-exempt, charitable organizations that provide assistance to individuals in the area directly affected by the December 26 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, provided the organization has full control and discretion over the uses of such funds.

are equally worthy, though not as well known. Differentiating between a small, worthy effort and a scam is important, and achievable if donors follow some guidelines.

The following tips are applicable to all giving, whether one is giving to disaster relief, education, research, or other causes.

•Be aware of organizations with similar sounding names. United Wayfarers for example, sounds similar to United Way, but it may be a different charity or a fraudulent organization.

•Be suspicious of callers and organizations that talk about having tax i.d. numbers or other official-sounding information. Lots of organizations have tax i.d. numbers, but that doesn't mean they are charities.

•Never give our your personal financial information in response to a telephone solicitation or e-mail. Get a phone number and call the charity to ensure it is legitimate

•Avoid cash donations and make checks payable to an organization, not an individual.

•Do not give to an organization that promises to have a driver come to your home or office and pick up a check. That's usually a sure sign of fraud.

--Ask if the fundraiser is a member of AFP, if it follows the Code of Ethical Principles and Standards of Professional Practice, and if they abide by the Donor Bill of Rights.

Internet fraud is a special category of tsunami relief scamming, and it is appearing primarily in two ways, according to the Delaware Department of Technology and Information: fraudulent disaster relief websites that appear to be legitimate charitable organizations because their site or name mimics a legitimate group's, and spam sent to a person's computer mailbox.

Unsolicited email scam is referred to as advance fee fraud, where the email sender tries to solicit money from individuals

by promising to share large bank accounts of supposedly dead relatives from the affected countries. The email usually asks the recipient to provide bank account numbers in order to receive money.

Delaware's Chief Information Officer Thomas Jarrett offers recommendations to avoid internet scams:

•Research the relief donation site before giving. One source for independent verification of charities is www.GuideStar.org. GuideStar includes listings of groups that have registered with and met the guidelines of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service's terms for a nonprofit charity.

•Never reply to any unsolicited or unfamiliar email address

•Never type your credit card or bank account number into an e-mail

•Physically type in a charity's website instead of clicking on a link

•Verify that the site is secure and that your personal information cannot be seen or stolen by others.

Also, report suspicious activity to your local police and/or state Attorney General's Consumer Fraud Department at 577-8600.

More information on charitable giving and evaluating a charity can be found on AFP's national website at www.afpnet.org under National Philanthropy Day - About Giving.

For assistance in finding legitimate organizations, visit the USA Freedom Corps' website at www.usafreedomcorps.gov.

The Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) represents 26,000 fundraising groups, fostering development and growth of fundraising professionals, and working to advance philanthropy through advocacy, research, education and certification programs. The Brandywine Chapter represents more than 150 charitable fundraisers in Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland.



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